



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Contact:** Lisa Richardson, 213-361-6980

**Email:** [lrichardson@bos.lacounty.gov](mailto:lrichardson@bos.lacounty.gov)

**Contact:** Lorenza Munoz, 213-458-6279

**Email:** [lmunoz@bos.lacounty.gov](mailto:lmunoz@bos.lacounty.gov)

### **PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM PREDATORS** ***LA County Supervisors Ridley-Thomas and Knabe Call on the State to Hike Penalties for Adults Soliciting Sex from Children***

In an unprecedented step in the fight against sex trafficking, Los Angeles County Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Don Knabe are calling on state legislators to dramatically stiffen penalties for adults convicted of soliciting sex from children. There have been numerous efforts over the past several years to combat the growing scourge of sex trafficking, but the majority of those efforts at the local and state level have focused either on the pimps who exploit the girls, or on providing treatment and help for the victims. While these efforts are to be applauded, there is a loophole that must be closed with regard to the so-called “Johns” – whose punishment should fit their crime, according to a board motion by Ridley-Thomas and Knabe.

Every day, children – primarily girls – as young as 10 years-old are being coerced and sold into prostitution in Los Angeles County and in counties throughout the state. According to experts in the field, the average life expectancy of these children once they enter the sex trade is seven years, due to the ravages of HIV/AIDS and the violence to which they are regularly subjected. The men who solicit sex from children, however, often are not arrested and prosecuted, and even when they are, typically face only a proverbial slap on the wrist. But this is not consensual sex; it is child molestation and rape, and the punishment should fit the crime. Only the state legislature, however, can mandate criminal penalties.

The motion, to be presented Tuesday, authored by Supervisors Ridley-Thomas and Knabe, asks lawmakers to amend the state penal code to make paying for sex a felony, rather than a misdemeanor, if the victim is a minor. It also requires the “customers” to register as sex offenders, and increases the fine from \$1,000 to \$10,000. And it calls on law enforcement to refocus its priorities and actively arrest and prosecute these predators.

“I am proud of the work Los Angeles County has done over the past 18 months to bring awareness to the horrific crime of child sex trafficking,” said Knabe. “However, in addition to doing all we can to protect the young victims, we must aggressively penalize those who solicit girls for sex and ensure they are the ones prosecuted, not the victims.”

In addition, the motion calls on the board to support federal legislation currently under consideration that would strengthen federal laws against child sex trafficking.

Chairman Ridley-Thomas emphasized that all levels of government and law enforcement must work together to protect these children, mainly girls, from being exploited and terrorized. While children cannot legally consent to sex, they are often charged with a prostitution related offense and become enmeshed in the criminal justice system.

“This is not a victimless crime,” said Chairman Ridley-Thomas. “These are children who are being exploited for the enjoyment of unscrupulous men, and it is our duty to protect them. To that end, California should step up and create the toughest laws in the nation that will either deter or, if necessary, punish those who purchase children.”

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